

# Cultural Heritage and Internet of Things

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## ABSTRACT

Ancient structures and historical buildings represent invaluable assets for future generations. They need to be preserved as much as possible since, as cultural heritage, provide with irreplaceable cultural, social and historical wealth, not only for the local heir communities, but in many cases for the whole human kind. In the context of today's technologies, the Internet of Things (IoT) paradigm represents one of the most effective ways for monitoring "things" around us. Cultural Heritage stays as one important application field for IoT, since conservation of cultural heritage sites can be significantly improved by means of an efficient and well-designed monitoring and control system.

However, there are many approaches to apply IoT on Cultural Heritage use cases. For this reason, in this paper we discuss IoT architectures currently used for monitoring and preservation of historical buildings, and identify existing challenges IoT applications are still facing to become a fundamental part in the conservation of the everlasting cultural values these buildings represent.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → **Architecture (buildings)**.

## KEYWORDS

IoT, Cultural Heritage, preservation, historical buildings.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage represent past and current values and traditions in every society and plays a mayor role in the creating a belief system and a sense of identity. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) classifies cultural heritage as tangible and intangible cultural heritage[29]. Additionally, tangible cultural heritage is classified as:

- Movable cultural heritage (e.g., paintings, sculptures, numismatics, manuscripts)
- Immovable cultural heritage (e.g., monuments, archaeological sites, religious/historical buildings)
- Underwater cultural heritage (e.g., shipwrecks, underwater ruins and cities).

Preserved Cultural heritage sites can contribute to the economic growth of local communities thanks to tourism. However it requires policies to be put in place for their preservation. According to UNESCO, as more tourists visit cultural heritage sites worldwide, some sites are being neglected in terms of preservation policies. The monitoring of these cultural heritage sites plays a fundamental role to preserve the current state of cultural heritage sites to ensure a proper conservation for future generations.

In order to perform this monitoring, IoT technologies are inherently the most logical alternative. The Internet of Things (IoT) paradigm makes an object interact with the surrounding environment, making him "intelligent". Combined with sensing technologies, wireless sensor networks allows for remote monitoring and management of objects in an efficient manner [22, 30, 36]. This can be used e.g., to track environmental conditions in spaces, detect structural changes in materials, or alert of an anomalous presence in forbidden areas. Such IoT applications can improve preservation, appraisal and fruition of culture heritage.

There are a large number of IoT technologies to be applied in the cultural heritage preservation use cases. From Low Power Wide Area Network (LPWAN) technologies (e.g., LoRA, SigFox, NB-IoT, DASH7, LTE-M, etc.) using a long-range cellular infrastructure, Wireless Local Area Networks (WLAN) technologies for mid-range communication (e.g., IEEE 802.11ah) or Wireless Personal Area

Network (WPAN) technologies (e.g., Zigbee, BLE, Z-Wave, WirelessHART, ISA100.11a, 6TiSCH, etc.) based on a more infrastructure-less approach. As a result, each particular cultural heritage preservation use case can benefit from different IoT architectures and technologies.

This work aims to carry out a critical analysis of IoT technologies applied to cultural heritage found in the literature, with emphasis in preventive conservation use cases. Finally, we discuss the challenges existing in IoT technologies when used for conservation of historical buildings located in remote areas, and open research questions will be raised.

## 2 STATE OF THE ART OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND IOT

When applying IoT to Cultural Heritage preservation, there are many approaches found in the literature. This work focuses on two of the most important:

- Cultural Heritage IoT systems applied to enhance cultural spaces. These systems are often focused on indoors places (although not always), and normally aim to preserve protected areas or to improve visitors' user experience.
- IoT systems for the conservation of Cultural Heritage. These systems aim to monitor and control the heritage' environmental and material conditions to optimally preserve them.

### 2.1 IoT for the Enhancement of the Cultural Heritage

Cultural, historic and archaeological spaces such as museums or castles can integrate the concept of IoT improve the overall visiting experience in a wide range of domains. Visitors to heritage sites each have different motivations, expectations, and needs. Museums often attempt to deal with this by offering different experiences that visitors can partake of. This can include e.g., specific guided tours or education activities for school groups. This is the approach followed by [5, 14], where they present IoT prototypes whose aim is to transfer "smartness" to cultural sites by applying different communication and sensor technologies. These works propose new applications to enhance the interaction of visitors in the museums or improve the navigation in the cultural spaces.

In order to support these use cases, different IoT architectures can be defined. The work in [15] presents an IoT system to represent and manage the object interaction inside cultural spaces with the visitors.

It points towards an IoT application design space where a set of configurable sensor nodes are able to transform cultural spaces, in an indispensable dynamic instrument for valorization, knowledge diffusion of cultural assets.

Accordingly, the authors in [24] also analyze how technology can play a crucial role in supporting museum visitors and enhance their overall museum visit experiences. The content delivery systems can provide relevant information and, at the same time, allow visitors to get the level of detail and the perspectives up to the level they are interested. In the same line, the authors in [34] propose a mobile recommender system for the Web of Data. Web of Data is term used to refer to the Semantic web, where RFD/XML models are exploited to publish structured, linked data between entities

within different data sources [10, 39]. They propose to leverage such semantic approach to supply information needs of tourists in context-aware on-site access to cultural heritage.

In the same way, DALICA is presented in [16] as an outdoor alternative to the previous works. DALICA is an agent-based ambient intelligence system for outdoor cultural heritage scenarios (i.e., Villa Adriana, Italy) that uses information about nearby points of interest, based on user location provided by GPS and Galileo location systems. Similarly in [6], the authors propose a general architecture of a SNOPS (Social Network of Object and PersonS) platform and presents a specific smart deployment related to the archaeological site of Herculaneum, Italy.

However, besides improving user experience, IoT systems can also be directly applied to enforce preservation and increase the security of cultural heritage sites. One clear example of this use case is introduced in [21], where an IoT-based integrated security system is capable to provide the site with visitor security and cultural heritage protection. In this work, one of the unnoticeable advantages of using IoT for security in cultural heritage sites, such as flexible security, is unveiled. Flexible and adaptable security can enable, for example, to adjust a secure perimeter to allow visitors with disabilities (e.g., partially blinded visitors) to temporally exceed it to better observe an artwork.

The previous works aim to mainly use IoT to enhance the cultural heritage site, in terms of user experience or security. In order to improve the user experience, these systems use IoT and multimedia technologies to enhance visitors enjoyment, offering them a different way of discovering a museum or a historical site. On the other hand, they can offer an improved control of protected areas by deploying sensors and actuators over the site. However these systems do not really help to the conservation of cultural heritage "per se", requiring additional preventive conservation IoT systems to unveil the IoT full potential on Cultural Heritage.

### 2.2 IoT in Cultural Heritage for Preventive Conservation

The other side of the coin of using IoT for cultural heritage are the preventive conservation use cases. The IoT's idea of "monitoring things" perfectly matches with monitoring any object in a cultural heritage site to prevent any future damage and to optimize their environmental conservation conditions.

*2.2.1 Preventive Conservation.* In order to take the necessary actions before it is too late, a preventive conservation is fundamental to pro-actively control the deterioration of cultural heritage. Long-term monitoring and predictive maintenance of the assets' physical conditions can significantly mitigate the damage and reduce future restoration costs [1, 27, 28].

Depending on the intrinsic nature of each cultural heritage asset, deterioration causes are subjected to the influence of different physical parameters. For example, artworks suffer from stress caused by physical agents such as temperature, humidity, radiation, or chemical agents (e.g., CO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>, O<sub>3</sub>, mineral salts, etc.) [17]. Meanwhile, temperature and humidity play a major role on archaeological structures because they are mostly built on stone [25].

Generally, abrupt changes of temperature and relative humidity (RH) may cause serious damage in all the different kind of objects, such as non-isotropic material deformation or detachment in multi-layered materials [37]. In hygroscopic materials, such as wood panels, which are the mainstay of many artworks, mechanical changes and deformations could also occur [20]. In the case of frescoes, soluble salts and moisture are the very common causes of deterioration. Therefore, early detections of dangerous levels of these physical parameters are essential to avoid this type of damage [19]. However, in order to ensure a safe, fully preventive conservation, environmental variables should not only be long-term monitored, but also predicted and foreseen with enough time to react (e.g., frosts or heatwaves). For this reason, IoT preservation systems should also perform data analytics in order to learn patterns and detect dangerous oscillations [4, 7].

**2.2.2 IoT and Preventive Conservation.** From a point of view of preservation of Cultural Heritage, the authors in [3, 9, 11, 23, 33] present clear examples of using preservation technologies to solve existing problems. These approaches are normally based on a WSN architecture that can be roughly divided in three parts: the sensor-based communication network, integrated multi-modal gateway and a centralized monitoring and data analytics platform deployed in the cloud.

Such approaches are usually characterized by 1) low power consumption of sensor nodes, 2) self-forming, self-healing wireless sensor networks, 3) pseudo-infinite storing capacity in the cloud and 5) low cost network deployment and operation. All these combined features make these approaches robust, cost-effective and easily-to-deploy solutions specially interesting for preventive conservation. The most common technologies used to build WSNs and to transport the sensor data are open or standard technologies such as WiFi, LoRaWAN, Sigfox or IEEE 802.15.4. However, some authors choose commercial solutions such as the Hobo data-loggers [2, 38].

Other advantage of deploying WSNs to perform preventive conservation is that WSN are normally noninvasive, and do not require the installation efforts of a wired network. This make these approaches more scalable and flexible than a traditional wired sensor networks, such as the ones presented in [19, 20, 31, 32]. However, wired approaches, although present evident limitations, are sometimes the only option to monitor unreachable areas without wireless connectivity (e.g., hidden points behind thick stone walls). Because of this, some works point towards a hybrid architecture [18, 26]

### 3 THE CHALLENGES FOR IOT IN HERITAGE SITES

The above discussed works present different approaches to use the IoT for cultural heritage. However, there is not a "one-size-fits-all" solution for every heritage site. Each site has its own particularities, needs and constraints. Many heritage sites may be isolated in rural areas with minimal connectivity, lacking of on-site technical support and limited power availability. Other sites may be in urban areas where strict security measures are required, and site assets cannot be under no circumstance altered. While in some cases they have to deal with large crowds intensively using multimedia systems, other cases may require ultra-low latency monitoring, or sensors with a battery lifetime of years. For this reason, we argue

there are still many open research paths within IoT-on-Heritage. We have identified the following areas as the most relevant ones:

**A. Dealing with limited connectivity.** Connectivity is perhaps the biggest challenge for many heritage sites. In terms of in-site connectivity, the new trends are rightly pushing to go wireless because of the many advantages wireless connectivity offers in terms of scalability and flexibility. However some particular sites may require hybrid wireless-wired solutions to achieve 100% in-site coverage. Additionally, special attention should be paid to ensure ultra-high reliability, avoiding data inconsistency and favouring redundant systems whenever possible. Regarding external connectivity, sites located in remote areas are the ones with more limitations for data backhauling to the cloud, since sometimes they lack of basic 2G/3G/4G coverage. Low-cost solutions using WiMAX, long-distance WiFi and VSAT have been proposed, however cost-effective solutions still need to be derived for each site [35].

**B. Energy-efficiency.** Energy-efficiency is an important area for further work in IoT in general, but particularly relevant for deployments for cultural heritage. Although, energy-efficient sensing may be relevant to optimize battery lifetimes in network nodes, it is not the biggest priority. Radio energy consumption can be one (or more) order of magnitude larger than other parts of the WSN nodes [8]. Because of this, achieving an energy efficient communication system with a low duty-cycle is currently the best way to achieve battery of years. However in general, low duty-cycle MAC protocols suffer from low performance in terms of latency, bitrate and reliability. A trade-off study for different heritage use cases may determine which protocols are most suited for each site.

**C. Deployment, configuration and maintenance.** Although sometimes neglected, logistic issues such as deployment, configuration and operation of IoT systems are often problematic. Many sites have huge economy budgets to employ technicians and network operators to perform these tasks. However many small, less popular cultural heritage sites lack of the means for a complex installation and operation. Currently there are technologies that allow easy deployments and configurations (e.g., WiFi WPS), which may be preferred [13]. However these solutions may not provide with the network security required in a cultural heritage site. For this reason, solutions that aim to both provide strict security and out-of-the-box configurations are worthy to be studied. Operation and maintenance should also be user-friendly and techniques for network self-diagnostics, self-healing and automated maintenance seem to be a promising study field. Finally, special attention needs to be paid to those systems that integrate visitor data and actions across the sites in terms of data privacy management [12].

### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Internet of Things is still emerging in terms of devices, technologies, applications and domains. While existing IoT research and development has mainly focused on smart homes, smart industries and smart cities, other less studied domains such as smart cultural heritage may offer potential as well. However, applying IoT for enhancing, protection, and conservation of cultural heritage raise a number of challenges, and it calls for new robust, low cost, easily deployable and maintainable systems. This is stated by the diversity of the presented methods and applications in this paper. We have

given a limited, but representative overview of the existing IoT solutions applied for Cultural heritage use cases, both for enhancing user experience and for improving preventive conservation. We have highlighted not only the most interesting ones, but also those isolated "exercises" that do not arouse effective interest due to the lack applicability or difficulty for its reuse in different contexts. Finally, we have described existing open challenges in IoT-on-Cultural-Heritage to encourage further research on application domains related with preservation of the tangible cultural heritage.

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